



# Multilayer hybrid nanosheet of mesoporous carbon – layered metal oxide as a highly efficient electrocatalyst for Li – O<sub>2</sub> batteries

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## ABSTRACT

An effective methodology to explore highly efficient oxygen electrocatalysts and electrodes for Li – O<sub>2</sub> batteries is developed via intimate layer-by-layer hybridization between mesoporous carbon layer and highly anisotropic 2D metal oxide nanosheets. The obtained multilayer hybrid nanosheets of mesoporous carbon – layered MnO<sub>2</sub> display outstanding functionalities as oxygen electrocatalysts with low overpotential and as the electrodes of Li – O<sub>2</sub> batteries with huge discharge capacity of ~7000 mAhg<sup>−1</sup> at 200 mA g<sup>−1</sup> and improved cyclability. The excellent electrocatalyst/electrode bifunctionality of the present material is attributable to enhanced electron transfer kinetics, maximized active sites, promoted electrocatalysis kinetics, and stabilization of unstable Mn<sup>3+</sup> species. This multilayer hybrid nanosheet structure is advantageous for facilitating reversible formation/decomposition of discharged product during cycling in Li – O<sub>2</sub> batteries via promoted electrolyte – oxygen diffusion. The present study underscores that exfoliated metal oxide nanosheet can be used as an efficient immobilization matrix for synthesizing novel 2D multilayer hybrid nanosheets with synergistically-improved electrocatalyst/electrode functionalities.

## 1. Introduction

The exploration of economically-feasible high-performance electrocatalysts is of crucial importance in emerging energy conversion technologies such as water electrolysis, fuel cell, and metal – O<sub>2</sub> batteries [1–3]. A great deal of research effort has been devoted for synthesizing cost-effective transition-metal-oxide-based electrocatalysts to replace conventional noble-metal-based ones [4,5,6,7]. The hybridization of nanostructured metal oxide with other species can provide a powerful methodology to optimize its electrocatalyst performance [8–10]. To date, most of hybrid materials are synthesized by the anchoring of electrocatalyst crystals on the surface of conductive materials such as graphene [8–10]. Since the beneficial effect of hybridization originates from the electronic coupling between hybridized species, the interfacial electronic interaction should be maximized for the optimization of the electrocatalyst performance of hybrid materials [11–18]. As building blocks for hybrid electrocatalysts, exfoliated inorganic nanosheets like transition metal oxide are highly promising because of their unusually high surface-to-volume ratio, well-defined

surface structure and wide bifacial surface, which is beneficial for enhancing the interfacial electronic coupling of nanohybrid [17,18]. However, it is difficult to fabricate precisely-matched and well-defined interfaces between layered metal oxide nanosheets and hybridized species. To circumvent this difficulty, layer-by-layer hybridization of transition metal oxide nanosheet with other species is supposed to provide a highly effective way of exploring high-performance functional materials, since the atomic-level contact between layer-by-layer-stacked components induces unusually strong interfacial electronic coupling between them. One of the most promising candidates for secondary layers on metal oxide nanosheet is mesoporous carbon [19], because the uniform deposition of thin mesoporous carbon layer on electrocatalytically-active metal oxide nanosheet enables to synthesize unique multilayer hybrid nanosheets with optimized pore structure and improved functionalities. Also, the intimate interfacial interaction in the multilayer hybrid nanosheet allows to tailor the bonding nature of core metal oxide nanosheet. This layer-by-layer hybridization strategy can provide an effective way of developing economically-feasible transition-metal/carbon-based electrocatalysts for replacing

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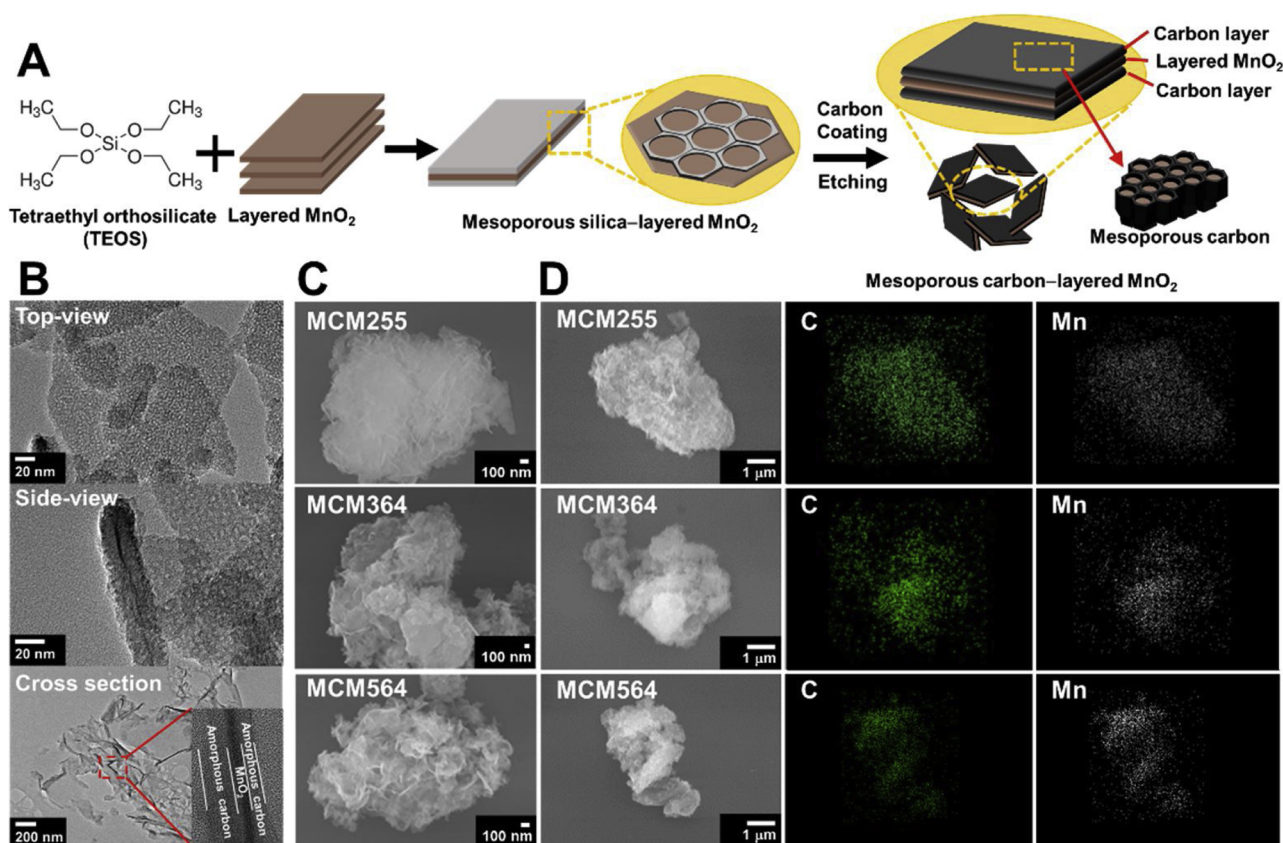


Fig. 1. (A) Schematic illustration of synthetic route, (B) TEM images of **MCM564**. (C) FE-SEM and (D) EDS – elemental maps of **MCM**.

conventional noble-metal-based ones. Despite unique advantages of multilayered hybrid nanosheet morphology, at the time of this submission, we are unaware of any other reports about the synthesis of 2D multilayer hybrid nanosheet of mesoporous carbon-layered metal oxide.

In this study, we report for the first time a novel effective methodology to synthesize the unprecedented multilayered hybrid nanosheets of transition metal oxide – mesoporous carbon, in which open-channels in mesoporous carbon are oriented perpendicularly to the surface of layered metal oxide nanosheets with well-defined interfaces. The 2D multilayer hybrid nanosheets of mesoporous carbon-layered MnO<sub>2</sub> ( $\delta$ -MnO<sub>2</sub>) are synthesized by the uniform coating of mesoporous carbon layer on the bifacial 2D surface of exfoliated MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet using silica template, as illustrated in Fig. 1A. The present multilayer 2D – 2D layered  $\delta$ -MnO<sub>2</sub> – carbon hybrid nanosheets show an outstanding electrocatalyst performance for Li – O<sub>2</sub> battery, which is superior to the other MnO<sub>2</sub> – carbon based hybrid materials including  $\alpha$ -MnO<sub>2</sub>-containing ones, as summarized in Table S1 of Supporting Information. The remarkable usefulness of the present heterolayer hybridization strategy in exploring efficient functional materials is obviously evidenced by excellent performances of multilayer 2D – 2D hybrid nanosheets as oxygen electrocatalysts and electrodes for Li – O<sub>2</sub> batteries.

## 2. Experimental

### 2.1. Synthetic procedures

As precursors for 2D multilayer hybrid nanosheets of carbon – layered MnO<sub>2</sub>, mesoporous silica-layered MnO<sub>2</sub> hybrid nanosheets were synthesized by deposition of mesoporous silica layers on the surface of exfoliated MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet using tetraethyl orthosilicate (TEOS). The carbon coating for the obtained precursor nanosheet was achieved by the following multistep process [20,21]; first, Al<sup>3+</sup> ion

was doped for the mesopore wall of the 2D silica-layered MnO<sub>2</sub> hybrid nanosheet. The obtained Al<sup>3+</sup>-doped precursor materials were dispersed in mesitylene with phenol and paraformaldehyde. The restored powdery mixtures were heated at 90 °C for 12 h, and then heated at 800 °C for 3 h under Ar flow, leading to the formation of mesoporous carbon layer on the surface of layered MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet. The alkaline etching for the silica layer yielded 2D multilayer hybrid nanosheets of mesoporous carbon-layered MnO<sub>2</sub> (denoted as **MCM** hybrid nanosheets). To control the carbon/MnO<sub>2</sub> ratio in the **MCM** hybrid nanosheet, several amounts of TEOS solution (255, 364, and 564 μL) were employed for the synthesis of the precursor silica-containing hybrid nanosheets. The obtained multilayer hybrid 2D nanosheets of mesoporous carbon-layered MnO<sub>2</sub> were denoted as **MCM255**, **MCM364**, and **MCM564**, respectively. The controllability of carbon content in **MCM** nanosheets with the change of TEOS concentration was confirmed by thermogravimetric analysis (TGA), see Fig. S1 of Supporting Information. To study the effect of layer-by-layer hybridization on functionalities, two kinds of 0D and 2D mesoporous carbon materials were prepared as references. Mesoporous 2D carbon (denoted as **MC564**, see Fig. S2 of Supporting Information) was prepared by the acidic etching of MnO<sub>2</sub> component from **MCM564** via the soaking in 5 M HCl aqueous solution at 60 °C for 24 h. Another reference of mesoporous 0D carbon nanosphere (denoted as **MC**) was synthesized by the identical synthetic process except for the absence of MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet, in which mesoporous silica nanoparticles were prepared and thus used as the precursor for **MC**. Field emission-scanning electron microscopy (FE-SEM) and transmission electron microscopy (TEM) analyses for both mesoporous silica and **MC** nanoparticles clearly demonstrated the maintenance of monodisperse 0D spherical morphology with narrow size distribution of ~40–50 nm before and after carbonization at elevated temperature, see Fig. S3 of Supporting Information. The transformation from mesoporous silica to mesoporous carbon was further confirmed by

powder X-ray diffraction (XRD) and N<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption isotherm analyses (Fig. S3).

## 2.2. Electrochemical measurement

The electrocatalytic activity was investigated by linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) method using three-electrode glass cell with a scan rate of 10 mV s<sup>−1</sup> in O<sub>2</sub>-saturated 0.1 M KOH aqueous solution. Before the measurement, oxygen gas was bubbled into the electrolyte for 30 min. The LSV curves carried out by RRDE-3A (ALS Co.) as a rotator and an IVIUM analyzer with a three-electrode cell. The rotating ring-disk electrode (RRDE) voltammograms were measured using the three-electrode cell with a bi-potentiostat. The ring current was measured on the Pt-ring glassy carbon disk electrode (ALS Co.) at a scan rate of 10 mV s<sup>−1</sup> with a ring potential of 1.3 V. The electrochemical impedance spectroscopy (EIS) data were collected with IVIUM analyzer in the frequency region of 0.01–30000 Hz at −0.067 V (V vs. SHE). Electrochemical tests were undertaken using a Swagelok-type Li–O<sub>2</sub> cell system with lithium metal as anode, Whatman micro-glass fiber as separator and electrodes prepared with active materials (MCM, MC564, and layered MnO<sub>2</sub>) as cathodes. For the test of Li–O<sub>2</sub> electrode activity, 1 M lithium triflate in TEGDME was used as the electrolyte instead of 0.1 M KOH solution employed for ORR activity test, because aqueous electrolytes tend to be volatile during cycling of Li–O<sub>2</sub> battery cell [22]. Conversely, TEGDME was reported to enhance the cyclability of Li–O<sub>2</sub> cell by the suppression of solvent evaporation, which merits the use of this electrolyte [22]. Cyclic voltammetry (CV) measurements were carried out at 5 mV s<sup>−1</sup> for each cell between 2–4.5 V and the corresponding current (mA)–voltage (V) data were plotted. Galvanostatic charge–discharge (CD) tests were performed using Wonatech Land Cyclers at voltage cut-offs of 2.0 (lower limit) and 4.5 V (upper limit). The application of a wide potential range for galvanostatic CD measurement of Li–O<sub>2</sub> cell prevented from employing aqueous KOH electrolyte due to its narrow potential window. Instead, TEGDME having wide potential window made this electrolyte proper for the test of Li–O<sub>2</sub> electrode activity. Cycle life measurements were conducted at limited discharge–charge under constant-current constant–voltage at capacity cut-off of 1000 mA h g<sup>−1</sup> of the active material. EIS analysis for Li–O<sub>2</sub> cells was also carried out within the frequency range of 10 kHz–100 MHz at a 10 mV AC voltage amplitude on an IVIUM Electrochemical Workstation. Experimental details for synthetic procedures and characterizations are provided in Supporting Information.

## 3. Results and discussion

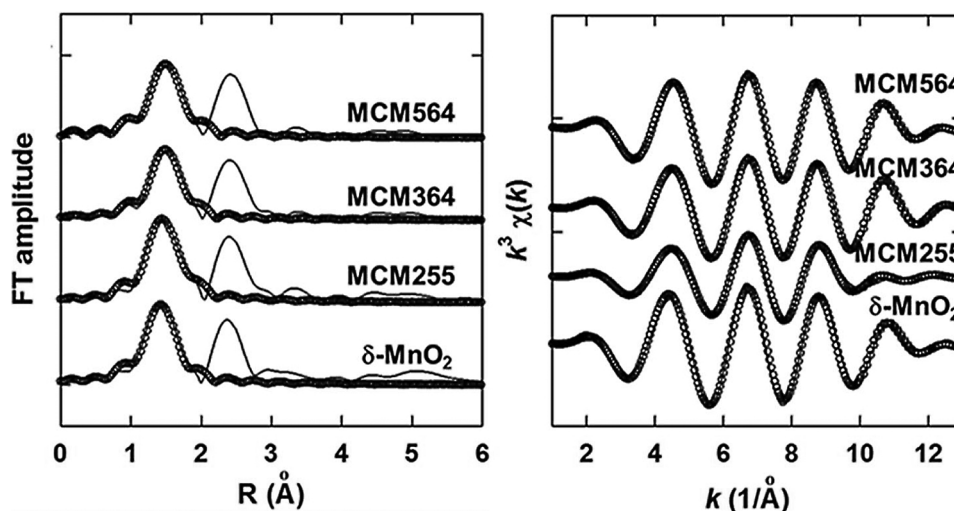
The formation of multilayer structure composed of core MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet and hexagonally-ordered mesoporous carbon coating layers is verified by TEM analysis (Fig. 1B). The distinct morphological difference between MCM and MC is regarded as another evidence for the successful surface anchoring of uniform 2D carbon layer on MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet (Fig. S3 of Supporting Information). As shown in Fig. 1C, FE-SEM analysis clearly demonstrates the house-of-cards-type stacking structures of MCM, confirming the maintenance of 2D nanosheet morphology and porous structure upon the formation of multilayer hybrid nanosheet. The homogeneous immobilization of mesoporous carbon layer on the MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet is further confirmed by energy dispersive spectrometry (EDS)–elemental mapping analysis showing the uniform distribution of Mn and C elements in the entire part of MCM, see Fig. 1D. As plotted in the powder XRD patterns of Fig. S4 of Supporting Information, all the MCM hybrid nanosheets commonly display an intense and broad feature at 2θ = 1° corresponding to the (100) reflection of hexagonally-ordered mesoporous carbon phase, indicating the presence of mesoporous carbon layer in these hybrid materials [23]. Additionally, a distinct diffraction peak corresponding to the (002) reflection of carbon species is discernible at 2θ = 26° for all the present materials [24]. The observed XRD features of MCM

nanohybrids are nearly identical to those of the mesoporous carbon references (MC and MC564) (Fig. S4 of Supporting Information), providing convincing evidence for the formation of mesoporous carbon layers in the MCM hybrid nanosheets. Conversely, there are no layered MnO<sub>2</sub>-related Bragg reflections in the present XRD patterns of the MCM hybrid nanosheets, strongly suggesting the homogeneous dispersion of monolayered MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet without phase segregation. The hybridization between carbon and MnO<sub>2</sub> is further confirmed by micro-Raman results showing characteristic spectral features of both species, see Fig. S5 of Supporting Information. According to C 1s X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) data in Fig. S6 of Supporting Information, all the MCM hybrid nanosheets display nearly identical carbon-related components centered at ~284.7, ~285.2, ~287.0, and ~288.9 eV, which are assigned as C–C, C–O, C=O, and carboxyl species, respectively [25]. This result confirms the deposition of carbon layer with similar bonding nature in these hybrid materials. In contrast to MCM, MC shows additional higher-energy component at ~290 eV corresponding to π–π\* transition, reflecting intramolecular charge transfer of carbon species [26]. The significant depression of this peak for MCM suggests the lowering of π electron density due to the interfacial charge transfer between carbon and MnO<sub>2</sub>. As presented in Fig. S6 and Table S2 of Supporting Information, the peak deconvolution analysis for Mn 2p XPS data demonstrates that an increase of carbon amount in MCM enhances Mn<sup>3+</sup> content with the lowering of average Mn oxidation state. This is attributable to the partial oxygen loss of MnO<sub>2</sub> during the combustion of organic precursor.

The revolution of Mn oxidation state and local structure upon hybridization is further evidenced by Mn K-edge extended X-ray absorption fine structure (EXAFS) analysis. As depicted in Fig. 2, all the MCM hybrid nanosheets commonly show two intense FT peaks corresponding to (Mn–O) and (Mn–Mn) coordination shells at ~1.5 and ~2.6 Å, respectively, indicating the maintenance of layered δ-MnO<sub>2</sub> lattice consisting of edge-shared MnO<sub>6</sub> octahedra. A closer inspection reveals that the anchoring of mesoporous carbon layer depresses the first FT peak, reflecting the increase of local structural disorder caused by the increase of Jahn-Teller-active Mn<sup>3+</sup> ion [27]. Since both equatorial (Mn<sup>3+</sup>–O<sub>eq</sub>) and (Mn<sup>4+</sup>–O) shells possess nearly identical bond distances of ~1.9 Å and axial (Mn<sup>3+</sup>–O<sub>ax</sub>) shell has longer bond distance of ~2.3 Å [27], the EXAFS curve-fitting analysis is carried out with structural model composed of two different (Mn–O) bonding shells. In one instance, mixed manganese oxide (e.g. MnO<sub>1.75</sub>) with average Mn oxidation state of +3.5 (i.e. [Mn<sup>3+</sup>]/[Mn<sup>4+</sup>] = 1) possesses the (Mn<sup>4+</sup>–O/Mn<sup>3+</sup>–O<sub>eq</sub>) and (Mn<sup>3+</sup>–O<sub>ax</sub>) bonds in the ratio of 5:1. The variation of the ratio of these bonds can provide quantitative information about the average Mn oxidation state of the present MCM hybrid nanosheets. Due to the strong correlation between coordination number (CN) and Debye-Waller factor (σ<sup>2</sup>), the σ<sup>2</sup> values are set the same for two kinds of (Mn–O) shells to probe the variation of their CN values upon the change of carbon content. Based on this structural model, the experimental FT spectra of MCM nanosheets as well as layered MnO<sub>2</sub> are well-reproduced, as plotted in Fig. 2. As summarized in Table 1, an increase of carbon content increases coordination number (CN) for (Mn<sup>3+</sup>–O<sub>ax</sub>) bonds, confirming a gradual increase of Mn<sup>3+</sup> content. Since Mn<sup>3+</sup> species with e<sub>g</sub><sup>1</sup> electronic configuration plays a crucial role in oxygen reduction reaction (ORR) [28], the increase of Mn<sup>3+</sup> content strongly suggests the beneficial effect of layer-by-layer hybridization on electrocatalytic activity.

As plotted N<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption isotherm data in Fig. S7 of Supporting Information, all the present materials exhibit distinct N<sub>2</sub> adsorption with distinct hysteresis, indicating their significant porosity. The Brunauer–Emmett–Teller surface areas of the present materials are determined as 586 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>−1</sup> for MCM255, 745 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>−1</sup> for MCM364, 1044 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>−1</sup> for MCM564, 1040 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>−1</sup> for MC, 821 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>−1</sup> for MC564, and 12 m<sup>2</sup> g<sup>−1</sup> for layered MnO<sub>2</sub>, respectively. Of noteworthy is that, despite its lower carbon content, MCM564 shows a larger surface area than do the mesoporous carbon references (MC and MC564),





**Fig. 2.** (Left) Fourier transformed (FT) data and (right) inverse FT data of Mn K-edge EXAFS spectra of the **MCM** hybrid nanosheets and layered  $\text{MnO}_2$  with the best fits. The solid lines and circles represent the experimental and fitted data, respectively.

**Table 1**

Results of nonlinear least-squares curve fittings for the first peak of Mn K-edge EXAFS spectra of the layered  $\text{MnO}_2$  and **MCM** nanosheets.

Sample	Bond	CN	R (Å)	$\Sigma^2(10^{-3} \text{ Å}^2)$
Layered $\text{MnO}_2$	$(\text{Mn}^{4+} - \text{O}/\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{eq}})$	5.41	1.88	3.27
	$(\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{ax}})$	0.59	2.23	3.27
<b>MCM255</b>	$(\text{Mn}^{4+} - \text{O}/\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{eq}})$	4.92	1.89	2.60
	$(\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{ax}})$	1.08	2.24	2.60
<b>MCM364</b>	$(\text{Mn}^{4+} - \text{O}/\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{eq}})$	4.81	1.91	2.80
	$(\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{ax}})$	1.19	2.26	2.80
<b>MCM564</b>	$(\text{Mn}^{4+} - \text{O}/\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{eq}})$	4.74	1.92	3.39
	$(\text{Mn}^{3+} - \text{O}_{\text{ax}})$	1.26	2.27	3.39

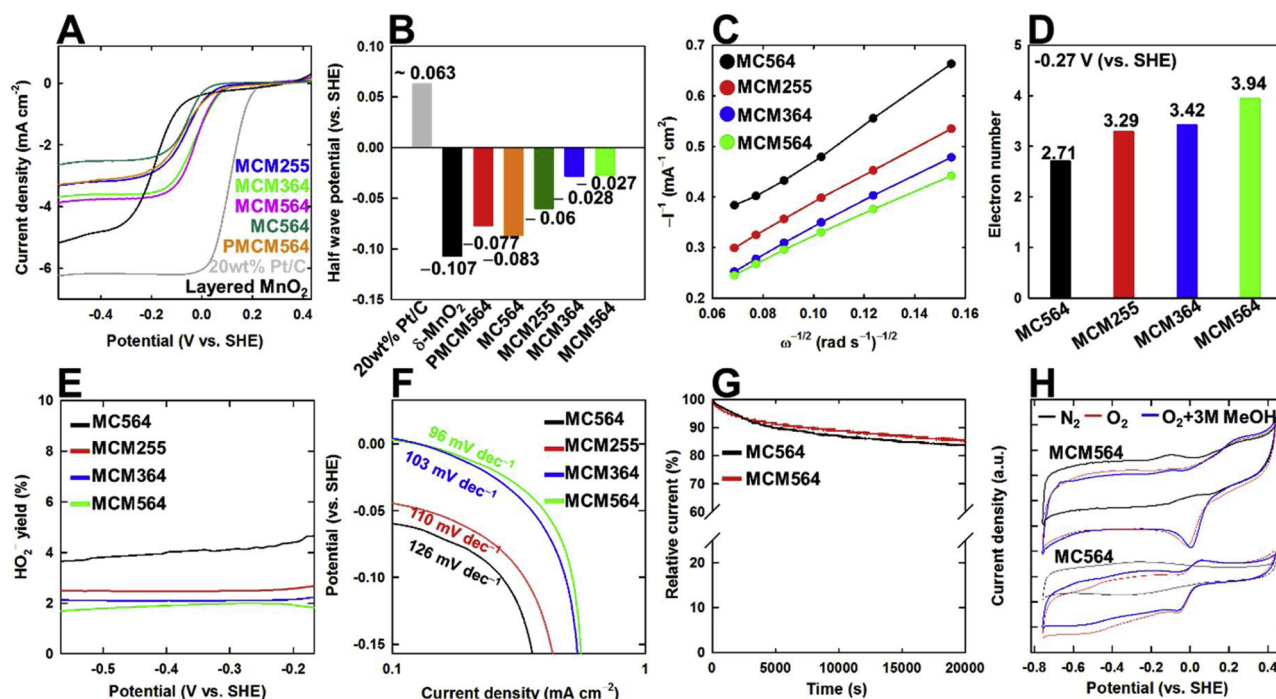
The curve fitting analysis was performed for the range of  $2.700 - k - 11.300 \text{ Å}^{-1}$  and  $0.644 - R - 2.056 \text{ Å}$ .

underscoring the beneficial effect of layer-by-layer hybridization with  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet on porosity by preventing the self-stacking upon the  $\pi - \pi^*$  interaction between mesoporous carbon layers. This result is cross-confirmed by pore volume calculation exhibiting a larger pore volume of **MCM564** ( $1.54 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ) than those of **MC** ( $1.25 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ) and **MC564** ( $0.74 \text{ cm}^3 \text{ g}^{-1}$ ), emphasizing the enhancement of porosity caused by the non-aggregated deposition of mesoporous carbon layers on the surface of  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet. Such enhancement of porosity upon layer-by-layer hybridization is beneficial for improving the oxygen electrocatalyst performance via the provision of more oxygen adsorption sites and the improved diffusion of electrolyte and oxygen [29].

To investigate the effect of multilayer hybridization on the electrocatalyst performance, the **MCM** hybrid nanosheets as well as 2D mesoporous carbon (i.e. **MC564**) and layered  $\text{MnO}_2$  are applied as electrocatalysts for ORR in alkaline condition. As shown in LSV curves of Figs. 3A and S8 of Supporting Information, all the **MCM** materials display superior ORR electrocatalytic performances with much more positive half-wave potentials than do **MC564** and layered  $\text{MnO}_2$ , underscoring the merit of layer-by-layer hybridization on electrocatalyst performance. The interstratification of alternating  $\text{MnO}_2$  layer and mesoporous carbon layer can prevent agglomeration of each 2D component during electrocatalytic reaction due to the depression of hydrophilic interaction between  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheets and  $\pi - \pi^*$  interaction between carbon layers. The resulting suppression of the tight stacking of  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheets and carbon species is quite effective in maintaining the expanded surface area and catalytically active surface sites of multilayer hybrid **MCM** nanosheet during the electrocatalytic reaction, which is responsible for the beneficial effect of multilayer hybridization

[30,31]. Additionally, as evidenced by XPS and EXAFS analysis, the occurrence of partial oxygen loss in tetravalent  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet during the combustion of organic precursor increases the content of reduced  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  ion. Since the increase of  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  ion enhances an electron transfer with adsorbed oxygen species and thus the ORR kinetics of manganese oxide [28], the stabilization of this species by the oxygen loss can make additional contribution to the improved electrocatalytic activity of the present **MCM** nanocomposites. Beyond an optimal ratio of **MCM564**, a further increase of carbon content leads to the degrading of ORR activity (Fig. S9 of Supporting Information), strongly suggesting the significant contribution of both  $\text{MnO}_2$  and carbon components to the improved electrocatalyst performance of **MCM**. From the Koutecky–Levich (K–L) plots of Fig. 3C, **MCM564** shows a much larger electron transfer number ( $n$ ) of 3.94 than that of **MC564** (2.71), highlighting the usefulness of multilayer hybridization in improving ORR kinetics toward four-electron transfer pathway. The positive effect of layer-by-layer structure on ORR kinetics is further evidenced by much lower production  $\text{HO}_2^-$  yield ( $\sim 2\%$ ) and lower Tafel slope of **MCM564** ( $96 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ ) than those of **MC564** ( $\sim 4\%$  and  $126 \text{ mV dec}^{-1}$ ), see Fig. 3E and 3F. The observed improvement of ORR kinetics is attributable to the optimized pore structure, surface area, and enhanced interfacial interaction [32]. The **MCM564** shows better long-term durability with  $\sim 86\%$  retention after 20,000 s, which is better than that of **MC564** ( $\sim 83\%$ ). Since the electrochemical stability of carbon species is strongly dependent on the maintenance of porously stacked structure and expanded surface area during the electrocatalytic reaction, the improved electrocatalytic durability of **MCM** hybrid nanosheets is attributable to the increased stability of mesoporous carbon layers caused by the intervention of  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet, resulting in the depression of  $\pi - \pi^*$  interaction between carbon layers. This result emphasizes the beneficial role of multilayered hybrid structure in improving electrochemical stability. As illustrated in Fig. 3H, the **MCM564** exhibits negligible current decay after the injection of methanol, which is in stark contrast to **MC564** showing notable current depression, indicating the improvement of selectivity toward ORR upon the formation of multilayer hybrid structure. This finding clearly demonstrates that intervention of  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet between mesoporous carbon layers is effective in depressing the serious methanol crossover of mesoporous carbon species via the prevention of severe frustration in the presence of methanol.

To further verify the effect of multilayer hybridization on electrocatalyst performance, the physical mixture of mesoporous carbon and layered  $\text{MnO}_2$  with the same composition as that of **MCM564** (denoted as **PMCM564**) is also tested as ORR electrocatalyst. As plotted in



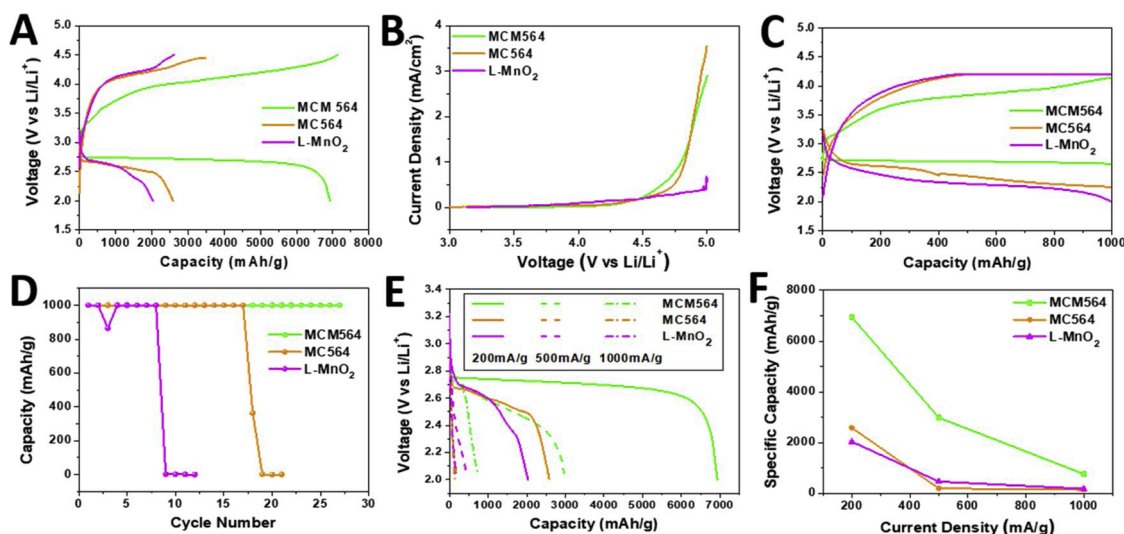
**Fig. 3.** (A) LSV plots and (B) half-wave potentials for MCM, MC564, layered MnO<sub>2</sub>, PMCM564, and 20 wt% Pt/C. (C) K–L plots, (D) electron transfer number plots, (E) peroxide yield plots, (F) Tafel plots, (G) ORR durability data, and (H) CV curves of methanol tolerance test for MCM and MC564.

Fig. 3A, the electrocatalyst performance of PMCM564 is much poorer than that of MCM564, confirming the beneficial influence of intimate layer-by-layer hybridization and the contribution of MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet to the improved functionality. Additionally, the hybrid material of 2D MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet and 0D mesoporous carbon nanoparticle (MC) is also synthesized as a reference and employed as ORR electrocatalyst to confirm the advantage of 2D–2D multilayer hybrid nanosheets in optimizing the oxygen electrocatalyst performance. In comparison with the present 2D–2D MnO<sub>2</sub>–carbon hybrid nanosheet of MCM564, the 2D–0D MnO<sub>2</sub> nanosheet–mesoporous carbon nanoparticle hybrid material delivers much inferior electrocatalyst performance (Fig. S10 of Supporting Information), underscoring the unique advantage of multilayer 2D–2D hybrid architecture in optimizing the electrocatalyst functionality of carbon and metal oxide. This result provides strong evidence for the novelty of the present multilayer hybridization strategy as a powerful synthetic route to explore efficient electrocatalyst materials.

As shown in electrochemical impedance data of Fig. S11 and Table S3 of Supporting Information, MCM564 displays smaller semicircle corresponding to the charge transfer resistance ( $R_{ct}$ ) and larger capacitance ( $C_{dl}$ ) than does MC564, indicating the enhancement of electron transfer property and improved accessibility of oxygen species to the electrocatalytically active sites. Since a fast electron transfer from Mn<sup>3+</sup> to adsorbed oxygen species plays an important role in the rate limiting step of ORR (Fig. S12 of Supporting Information), the enhancements of charge transfer kinetics and oxygen adsorptivity make additional crucial contribution to the improved ORR performance of MCM.

Based on its promising oxygen electrocatalytic activity, MCM564 is employed as a cathode catalyst of Li–O<sub>2</sub> batteries, as compared with mesoporous 2D carbon (MC564) and layered MnO<sub>2</sub>. As plotted in the CD curves (Fig. 4A), MCM564 displays much greater discharge capacity (6932 mA h g<sup>−1</sup>) at 200 mA g<sup>−1</sup> and smaller charging overpotential (1.38 V) than those of MC564 (2584 mA h g<sup>−1</sup>; 1.50 V) and layered MnO<sub>2</sub> (2035 mA h g<sup>−1</sup>; 1.53 V). Also, much higher discharging potential occurs for MCM564 than for the other materials. In CV curves of Fig. S13 of Supporting Information, a cathodic peak appears at a higher

onset potential of 2.50 V for MCM564 than for MC564 (2.25 V) and layered MnO<sub>2</sub> (2.20 V). The LSV curves of oxygen evolution reaction (OER) indicate much higher oxidative stability with a higher onset potential for MCM564 (4.00 V) than for MC564 (3.56 V) and layered MnO<sub>2</sub> (3.30 V) (Fig. 4B), underscoring the improved ORR and OER activities of hybrid nanosheet for Li–O<sub>2</sub> cathode. From the electrochemical test under CC–CV mode at limited capacity of 1000 mA h g<sup>−1</sup> (Fig. 4C), a very flat discharge plateau appears at 2.7 V commonly for MCM564 and MC564, whereas layered MnO<sub>2</sub> shows a steep plateau. The MCM564 exhibits a lower overpotential for charging and better cyclic retention than do MC564 and layered MnO<sub>2</sub> (Fig. 4D). The present experimental findings underscore the crucial contribution of layered MnO<sub>2</sub> to the excellent electrocatalytic activity of the MCM564 hybrid nanosheet. Of noteworthy is that, in contrast to MCM564, the layered MnO<sub>2</sub> shows drastically decreased cycle retention after the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle. As plotted in Fig. S14A and S14B of Supporting Information, the XPS analysis clearly demonstrates that the discharge products of layered MnO<sub>2</sub> is formed after the ORR process and partially decomposed by the following OER process. This finding strongly suggests that the inefficient decomposition of discharge products during the CD process of layered MnO<sub>2</sub> leads to the surface deposition of thick insulating layer on the electrode and thus the significant blocking of oxygen gas pathway [33,34]. Such limited solubility and diffusivity of oxygen significantly degrades the cyclability of layered MnO<sub>2</sub> for Li–O<sub>2</sub> batteries. In comparison with layered MnO<sub>2</sub>, the MCM hybrid nanosheet shows more efficient decomposition of the discharge products, indicating the beneficial effect of multilayer hybridization on charge transfer for dissociation of discharged products and the homogeneous formation/facile decomposition of discharge products at low overpotential. This is responsible for the promising cycle retention of multilayer hybrid MCM564 nanosheet. As can be seen clearly from Fig. 4E and F, even at high current densities, the discharge capacities of MCM564 are much larger than those of MC564 and layered MnO<sub>2</sub>. The crucial role of layer-by-layer hybridization between mesoporous carbon and MnO<sub>2</sub> is further confirmed by the inferior electrode performances of physically-mixed PMCM564, see Fig. S15 of Supporting Information. Such an excellent electrode performance of MCM564 for Li–O<sub>2</sub>



**Fig. 4.** (A) First CD curves, (B) LSV curves, (C) first CD curves in CC–CV mode at limited capacity of  $1000 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ , (D) cycle performances, (E) discharge capacity profiles at various current densities, and (F) current density-dependent discharge capacities for **MCM564**, **MC564**, and layered  $\text{MnO}_2$ .

batteries is attributable to the enhancement of  $\text{Li}^+$  ion diffusion and electron transfer originating from improved accessibility of oxygen species to the active sites. As an architectural reference for  $\text{Li}-\text{O}_2$  electrode functionality, the 2D–0D  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet–mesoporous carbon nanoparticle hybrid material is compared with the optimized 2D–2D layered  $\text{MnO}_2$ –mesoporous carbon nanosheet (**MCM564**) (see Fig. S16). The 2D–2D hybrid **MCM564** nanosheet delivers higher discharge capacity ( $6932 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  at  $200 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ ) with an overpotential of  $1.22 \text{ V}$  at cut-off capacity of  $1000 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$ , compared to that of 2D–0D nanohybrid ( $5124 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  at  $200 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ ) with an overpotential of  $1.49 \text{ V}$  at  $1000 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  capacity cut-off. The relatively poorer performance of 2D–0D nanohybrid than 2D–2D homologue is attributable to the following two factors; (1) In contrast to layer-by-layer stacking structure of 2D  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet and 2D mesoporous carbon layer in **MCM564**, there is a significant variation in interfacial contacts between 2D  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet and 0D mesoporous carbon nanoparticle depending on their orientations, resulting in non-uniform surface activity. (2) The distance between 2D  $\text{MnO}_2$  nanosheet and 0D mesoporous carbon varies depending on bond strength at the interface, impeding the interfacial charge transfer between carbon and manganese oxide. This comparative experiment provides strong evidence for remarkable advantage of 2D–2D multilayer hybridization strategy in exploring highly efficient electrocatalyst materials.

To dates, there have been lots of researches about the hybrid materials composed of  $\text{MnO}_2$  and carbon for the application as oxygen electrocatalysts and  $\text{Li}-\text{O}_2$  cathodes, since these manganese oxide-based hybrid materials boast improved electrode/electrocatalyst performances and economical/environmental merits [35–50]. Among various polymorphs of  $\text{MnO}_2$ , layered  $\delta\text{-MnO}_2$  with numerous exposed catalytic active sites form an interconnected hierarchically porous structure with expanded basal spacing suitable for diffusion of oxygen and the immersion of electrolyte. In one instance, Zhang et al. reported a hybrid material of  $\delta\text{-MnO}_2/\text{CCFs-K80}$  (carbon composite fibers) synthesized by the liquid deposition onto electrospun carbon fibers and its promising  $\text{Li}-\text{O}_2$  electrode performance with a large capacity of  $1076 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  at  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$  [35]. Liu et al. reported  $\delta\text{-MnO}_2$ -based hybrid electrode via the direct growth of graphene and  $\delta\text{-MnO}_2$  on Ni foam, which delivers a high discharge capacity of  $\sim 3660 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  at  $48 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$  for  $\text{Li}-\text{O}_2$  batteries [36]. The observed electrochemical performance of this material can be ascribed to its 3D scaffold structure allowing for facile oxygen diffusion and electrolyte immersion. Similarly, Wang et al. synthesized graphene-supported  $\delta\text{-MnO}_2$  hybrid by using microwave-assisted growth method, which displays a

dramatically enhanced capacity ( $5862 \text{ mA h g}^{-1}$  at  $100 \text{ mA g}^{-1}$ ) for  $\text{Li}-\text{O}_2$  cathode [37]. In comparison with these previous studies, the present multilayer 2D–2D hybrid **MCM564** nanosheet shows superior  $\text{Li}-\text{O}_2$  cathode performance due to its porous hybrid structure with expanded surface area and numerous active sites for the rapid diffusion of lithium ions and oxygen during battery cycling. Also, mesoporous carbon layer in this multilayer hybrid nanosheets forms a highly electrically conductive network, resulting in the improvement of electrical conductivity. It is worthwhile to mention that, despite the intrinsic inferior electrocatalyst performance of layered  $\delta\text{-MnO}_2$  phase than  $\alpha\text{-MnO}_2$  phase, the present multilayer 2D–2D **MCM564** nanohybrid exhibits much superior electrocatalyst functionality to the other  $\text{MnO}_2$ -based nanohybrids including  $\alpha\text{-MnO}_2$ -containing ones (Table S1), underscoring the outstanding validity of the present multilayer hybridization methodology in exploring efficient electrocatalyst materials.

The effects of CD cycling on the electrode morphologies and the nature of discharge product are further investigated with *ex-situ* FE-SEM and XPS analyses. As presented in Fig. S17 of Supporting Information, porous sheet-like discharge products are uniformly grown on the surface of **MCM564**, which is helpful to improve the diffusion of electrolyte and the nucleation of secondary discharge product [32]. After CD cycling, the discharge products of **MCM564** can be efficiently decomposed, which is in stark contrast to **MC564** and layered  $\text{MnO}_2$  showing the incomplete decomposition of discharge products after recharging process. The observed fast decomposition of discharge products ( $\text{Li}_2\text{O}_2$ ,  $\text{Li}_2\text{O}$ , and carbonated-lithium species) is responsible for the improved electrode performance of **MCM564**, since the precipitation of discharge products on the surface of electrodes blocks the oxygen pathway and depresses the electrode performance. According to *ex-situ* Li 1s XPS analysis (Fig. S14), **MCM564** exhibits the formation of discharge products after discharging and the remarkable depression of Li 1s peak upon recharging process, indicating the efficient deposition/decomposition of discharge products on the surface of **MCM564**. In Mn 2p XPS data (Fig. S14C and Table S4), **MCM564** experiences the lowering of  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  content during discharging process due to the oxidation of Mn ion via ORR process [51], and the almost complete restoration of  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  component upon recharging process, confirming the high reversibility of CD process in **MCM564**. Conversely, layered  $\text{MnO}_2$  demonstrates less effective restoration of  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  component during recharging process, which is attributable to a strong interaction between  $e_g$  orbitals of  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  and 2p orbitals of reduced oxygen species. For **MCM564**, this interaction becomes weaker by the partial occupation of the  $e_g$  orbitals of  $\text{Mn}^{3+}$  by  $\pi-\pi^*$  electrons from anchored carbon species, resulting in



the facilitation of OER. Although **MCM564** has a lower electrical conductivity than **MC564**, both the charged derivatives of **MCM564** and **MC564** show similar electrical conductivity (Fig. S18 of Supporting Information), emphasizing the complete decomposition of insulating discharge products in **MCM564** after charging process. Such effective complete decomposition of discharge products in **MCM564** can be ascribed to the role of uniform pores as tunnels to supply oxygen into the interior of electrode.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this work, a novel effective methodology is developed for the first time to synthesize unprecedented multilayered 2D–2D hybrid nanosheets of transition metal oxide–mesoporous carbon via the layer-by-layer hybridization between layered metal oxide nanosheet and mesoporous carbon layer. The obtained hybrid nanosheets display outstanding performances as high-performance oxygen electrocatalysts for Li–O<sub>2</sub> electrode with remarkably improved discharge capacity and cyclability, highlighting the remarkable validity of the present methodology firstly reported in this work. As summarized in Table S1 of Supporting Information, despite the intrinsic inferior electrocatalyst activity of layered  $\delta$ -MnO<sub>2</sub> phase than  $\alpha$ -MnO<sub>2</sub> phase, the present multilayer  $\delta$ -MnO<sub>2</sub>–carbon hybrid nanosheets show a much superior electrocatalyst performance for Li–O<sub>2</sub> battery over the other MnO<sub>2</sub>-based hybrid materials including  $\alpha$ -MnO<sub>2</sub>-containing ones, highlighting the remarkable merit of the present heterolayer hybridization strategy in exploring novel efficient electrocatalysts. The excellent electrocatalyst/electrode performances of hybrid nanosheets are attributable to the optimization of interfacial charge transfer, pore structure, enhanced electrocatalysis kinetics, and reversible formation/decomposition of discharged product during cycling in Li–O<sub>2</sub> batteries originated from their unique multilayer structure. The synthetic method developed in this study provides an effective protocol to explore diverse 2D multilayer hybrid nanosheets with synergistically-improved functionalities, emphasizing the crucial importance and novelty of the present research. Considering vast pools for exfoliated inorganic nanosheets like transition metal oxides, transition metal dichalcogenides, and layered double hydroxides with tailorable physicochemical properties as well as coating carbon/inorganic layers with various functionalities, there are new opportunities to develop various 2D multilayered hybrid nanosheets with excellent

#### Supporting information

Synthetic and characterization methods. Structural and resistance parameters determined by XPS and EIS analyses. HR-TEM, N<sub>2</sub> adsorption–desorption isotherms, and electrochemical performance results are given in Supporting Information.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apcatb.2019.05.025>.

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